Notes on Elite Interviewing, EPIC Workshop, Florence, May 2002:

Analysis of elites as a crucial group for understanding the character of society / sector of society as a whole.

Face-to-face interviewing is the principal method, though worth noting that other methods are available.

Other methods:

1. Traditionally, and to extent that elite analysis has had a systematic empirical content, reliance has been placed on *biographical evidence* which is relatively widely available for elites. (Especially strong tradition in Britain).

Main problem: generally poor guide to elite ideology and behaviour.

2. *Officially recorded elite behaviour* (e.g. roll call votes in US congress or in UN). But these data problematic as evidence for underlying elite perceptions, attitudes and intentions.

And anyway, for majority of elite individuals, probably no officially recorded sets of standardised and substantively significant behaviours available.

3. *Participant observation*: this "fly on the wall" method is potentially very insightful as a repeated, in-depth, direct observation of elite behaviour. Usually generate more qualitative ethnographic, rather than quantitative, accounts of elite behaviour.
But:
Negotiating access or "insider status" for such studies, as well as actually carrying out such studies, is difficult and time-consuming.
Moreover, questionable as to how much the continued presence of the researcher affects the elite arenas or behaviours that are being observed.
As such, this type of study relatively rare – one recent example is George Ross, *Jacques Delors and European Integration*, Oxford UP, 1995 (value of study for you to judge) – and, frankly, not really viable for typical doctoral student researcher.

So, generally, face-to-face interviewing most suitable method of research.

Functions of Face-to-face Elite Interviewing:

Interviews as more controlled interactions than participant observation, less threatening and require less trust. Style of exchange can be adapted to particular situation and agenda sharply focused within compressed period of time.

Substantive value of interviewing:

As complement to social background studies, where relevant published information may be incomplete.
To elucidate and complement studies of elite decision-making, by providing additional information about motives that help explain actions and constraints in policy-making and implementation.

As major – or even sole – means of generating relevant data. For example, in his comparative study of elite political cultures, *The Beliefs of Politicians* (Yale UP, 1973), Robert Putnam argued that talking and listening to those in leadership positions was excellent way to "check reality against elite theory".

Interviewing elites also serves other functions:

Elite respondents act as experts about other individuals, events, processes, institutions etc. By virtue of their status as "insiders", elite interviewees guide researcher.

They also act as a "sounding board" for testing preliminary hypotheses or conclusions derived from earlier interviews.

They may also act as very well-informed commentators on other matters that lie outside elite theory *per se*: behaviour of a political party, explication of a policy, or major event etc.

They may also act as "gate-keepers", controlling access to lower-ranking (but still elite) individuals, or to unpublished documentary evidence. This role is particularly pertinent in the context of institutions with relatively strict chain of command, such as military, judicial and law enforcement agencies. But is also relevant for business corporations, political parties, trade unions, governmental ministries.

Types of Face-to-face Elite Interviewing:

3 broad types:

Unstructured or non-directive interview
Semi-structured interview
Fully-structured interview

i.e. to what extent is interview determined, or *standardised*, prior to being held?

Unstructured variant is least used (though may emerge in course of participant observation).

Real choice is between semi- and fully- structured variants:

Central dilemma: With non-standardised, flexible agenda, likelihood of qualitatively rich array of personal insights. With more standardised approach, greater likelihood of statistical rigour and case comparability, and the generation of quantifiable data.

With elites, researcher is likely to be eager to learn from, and draw upon, very detailed knowledge they typically possess. As such, *non-standardised* interview method is particularly appropriate and fruitful – they have unique experiences and vantage-points, complex and sophisticated outlooks, and the expertise that the researcher may wish to exploit, that merit detailed and *individualised* exposition.

Choice between standardised and non-standardised interviewing tends to be associated with 2 different traditions: respectively the positivist and the phenomenological. This linkage not completely rigid, but there is a tendency for standardised structured interviews to generate quantitative and codifiable evidence with which to test a positivistic empirical theory, while evidence generated from semi-structured interviewing is obviously more qualitative and, hence, more resistant to being coded on a quantitative standardised basis.

Best decision is to try to draw wherever possible on the strengths of both orientations, to their mutual benefit, by using hybrid techniques that combine both semi-structured and fully-structured elements within the same interview. (*The strategy I adopted for my own Ph.D. research*).

Overall, though, fully-structured standardised interviews typical of mass surveys not really conducive to interviewing elites. Benefits of the semi-structured, nonstandardised interview more substantial.

The Interviewing Process

Critical task: obtaining consent of elite individuals to be interviewed, and defining the nature of the access once agreement is secured. (i.e., need to build trust and rapport).

Identification of the particular set of elite individuals to be contacted:

This may be straightforward, such as when the occupants of particular institutional positions form the “obvious” target group.

On the other hand, where elites are chosen because of their putative wielding of political power, considerable uncertainties and some arbitrary decisions may be involved. (This is generally unavoidable). This is especially the case with respect to “defensive” or “secretive” bureaucracies, for example, in developing or authoritarian countries. But not only in these types of contexts – take, for example, the case of Britain where, despite being a supposedly liberal regime, the Official Secrets Act of 1911 has made interviews with top civil servants very difficult. This not only complicates the negotiations concerning access to elites, but also the subsequent use and control of interview transcripts.

In addition, the researcher’s agenda will have implications: if it seems to the potential elite interviewee to be highly sensitive, peripheral to his/her interests, or deal with matters that may show them to be inexpert, this will create access problems.

In these circumstances, some capacity on the part of the researcher to point to shared experiences or outlooks will be helpful. Above all, there is a need to present oneself as a serious, well-informed and *neutral* (in the best sense of the word) academic researcher. In gaining access to potentially hostile elites, and overcoming their potential reluctance to be interviewed, sponsorship by a third party – whether personal or institutional – may be very helpful and, indeed, critical. Such sponsorship may come from your supervisor, your academic institution or possibly a former (retired) member of the elite in question with whom you have made contact. The latter can be especially useful in advising you on key contacts and tactics etc.

Once the interview is secured, the benefits of an open-ended and flexible exchange with the interviewee can only be realised fully through thorough preparation beforehand. Regardless of whether the interviewee is a leader of a business organisation, political party, pressure group or trade union etc., try to obtain as much relevant background information about the interviewee and his or her organisation as possible. In doing so, you will not only come across as a serious and well-informed researcher, but will signal, implicitly, to the interviewee that superficial and/or evasive responses on their part will not suffice. One tactic may be to set out explicitly your proposed agenda in your initial request for the interview and, as some researchers have done, to organise a preliminary or exploratory interview with the respondent in which to confirm the agenda. The latter is obviously dependent on the respondent's willingness to do so, and the time available to the researcher.

The absolute golden rule, however, is in no way to come across as "threatening" to the interviewee. After all, the principal aim of the interview is obviously to obtain relevant, frank, and insightful comment on the researcher's agenda – i.e., to get the elite interviewee to "open up". The researcher, in fact, has only a limited period of face-to-face contact in which to build the necessary rapport to achieve these goals. One author (L.A. Dexter, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*, Northwestern University Press, 1970) has recommended "sympathetic neutrality" as the best posture to adopt because it tries to encourage the respondent to be frank through a sense of like-mindedness and mutual empathy combined with the non-threatening image of an academic observer.

In addition, in terms of covering his or her research agenda, the interviewer must be flexible. With semi-structured interviews, there may be no overall pre-determined structure, no specific question order or starting point. You, as the researcher, should certainly develop an interview agenda and prioritise the issues you wish to cover. But be prepared for the fact that in practice, it is virtually impossible to stick to your agenda in a strict or rigid way and at the same time maintain the conversational style that is required. That is, be prepared to work through your agenda in a flexible way.

The interviewer's task is formidable: to extract the information you require, listen extremely carefully to the interviewee's responses, monitor the coverage of the research agenda, and keep an eye on the time!

Given this, wherever possible, seek to have the interview tape-recorded. Sometimes, in particularly hostile or sensitive contexts, this may not be possible. Also, some elite individuals may be less frank or indiscrete when being recorded than when not. But in general, elite individuals are generally accustomed to having their comments recorded.

If you are *not* able to tape-record: take basic notes, as best you can, during the interview (but without affecting the momentum of the conversation) and then write up detailed notes *immediately* after the interview. This is an acceptable form of processing interview material in such circumstances.

If you *are* able to tape-record: the great and obvious advantage is that you will have a complete record of the conversation. But reach a crystal-clear agreement with the respondent on how you are subsequently able to use the recorded material. (*More on this in the Workshop*).

On transcribing: transcribing recorded material is arduous and very time consuming – it is estimated that a one-hour interview takes ten hours to fully transcribe. If it is your intention and goal to fully transcribe interview material, do it as you go along, so that you are not left with a mountain of transcription to undertake at the end of your series of interviews. In addition, if transcription is built into, and runs parallel with, the interviewing phase itself, the researcher will be able to see, rapidly, the quality and character of the evidence that is emerging. In this sense, it will aid the researcher in refining or amending the research agenda as she or he goes along.

However, as a means of cutting time and conserving resources, and as an alternative to full transcription, partial transcription of interviews, summaries of interviews, the development of your own codes with which to organise your material thematically and to identify particularly interesting points of view or useful quotation etc., may be alternatives. (*Again, more on this in the Workshop*).

Finally, you will need to develop some criteria for appraising the reliability and veracity of the opinions and information provided by the respondent. You may want to make your own "internal" assessment – preferably noted down immediately after each interview – of the respondent as an individual: was there at least the impression of openness and spontaneity? Alternatively, were there signs of reticence or embarrassment? Were details of past events recalled readily and clearly? Did the respondent appear to value the researcher's concern for scholarship and intellectual inquiry?

In addition, though, it is sometimes possible that "external" criteria – or what is sometimes referred to as a process of "triangulation" – can be deployed. That is, other respondents may provide verification (or at least, partial verification) of what a previous respondent has said. Documents such as legislative committee hearing transcripts, specialised publications or newspaper reports may also sometimes provide a check on the information supplied in the interview. All of which is a further reason to be as well-informed as possible about the elite individual prior to the interview.